
Advances in Project Management Series¹

The Art of Communication

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Introduction to the November PMWJ Article by Dr Lynda Bourne

The art of communication

The recently released Sixth edition of the APM Body of Knowledge consists of four major sections: context, people, delivery and interfaces. While the management of typical project management 'things' such as scope, schedule, cost, resource, risk, integration and quality comes in the section focused on delivery, it is telling that the area concerned with people and interpersonal skills appears earlier in the table of contents.

Indeed, if we think about the typical shortfalls in terms of skills that impact many projects, and often lead to failure, the list may include diverse areas such as expectation management, trust, user acceptance, relationship management, stakeholder management, influencing, negotiation, conflict resolution, delegation, and escalation. The common theme is the need to deal with people, and their needs, expectations, wants, expectations, preferences and ultimately their values.

Not surprisingly the first area featured in the APM BOK under the people area is that of communication. Communication is defined by the APM BOK as the means by which information or instructions are exchanged, which thereby provides the underpinning skill to address the shortfalls and overcome the barriers between groups and individuals in the project environment.

Whilst acknowledging that communication is fundamental to the project management environment, as poor communication will lead to misunderstood requirements, unclear goals, alienation of stakeholders, ineffective plans and many other factors leading to failure, the BOK proceeds to make a very powerful statement:

“None of the tools and techniques described in this body of knowledge will work without effective communication.”

¹The PMWJ *Advances in Project Management series* includes articles by authors of program and project management books published by Gower in the UK. Each month an introduction to the current article is provided by series editor **Prof Darren Dalcher**, who is also the editor of the Gower *Advances in Project Management series* of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. For more on Gower project management, visit <http://www.gowerpublishing.com/default.aspx?page=2063>.

Many qualifications and training courses focus on the knowledge, and increasingly, the skills and attributes required for effective project management. But the core skills of communication seem to have overarching and underpinning value that connects and enables effective project management.

Yet, it is an often-neglected art. Unobscuring the path to wisdom and success is not explicitly addressed or acknowledged until we move beyond project management and delve into the armoury of the skills and capabilities underpinning project leadership.

Bennis and Nanus talked about the five leadership strategies, which include management of risk, management of attention, management of communication, management of trust, and management of respect. Once again, one could argue that communication itself underpins the other four strategies and enables leaders to develop and share their vision, to delegate and involve followers and to develop the flexibility required to continue to learn and adapt.

Kotter asserted that management is a science; an active process, while leadership is an art; an interactive and inclusive engagement process. Indeed, focusing on communication makes project leadership much closer to the performing arts, where the leader utilises persuasive communication and power to induce audiences and participants to believe and share in the world, and the vision developed and enacted by the leader.

As we strive to interact with a growing complexity and uncertainty associated with our project endeavours, we are increasingly called upon to develop the leadership skills required to engage with stakeholders, risks, expectations and needs and to deliver meaningful change.

Advising upwards

To facilitate successful projects, communication needs to occur in many directions. Upwards, downwards, sideways and all around. After all leadership often implies making things happen when we are not managing or when we are not in control. The article by Dr. Lynda Bourne calls attention to the need to communicate upwards for effect. Communication upwards is concerned with conveying meaningful and useful information that is fit for purpose; in this case providing the required insights needed to support projects.

The article explores the difficulties in using language as a means of communication, the impact of being overly precise, and the risk associated with fostering a false sense of precision and knowledge. It relies on the authors extensive experience in identifying and highlighting the issues associated with leadership, and stakeholder management and engagement. The article follows Lynda's recently published book, *Advising Upwards: A framework for understanding and engaging senior management stakeholders*, released

by Gower. The book brings together a number of international experts offering insights into the decisions, risks and challenges associated with managing up.

Lynda's work has expanded the available knowledge regarding the management of stakeholders, and the recent paper is a welcome addition to the literature on dealing with senior managers and sponsors and the impact of communication in such a context.

Progress requires leaders and managers to look beyond the tenets of management and to engage with the skills and capabilities associated with leadership. Unobscuring the path to wisdom and offering a true measure of progress rely on the gentle art of communication. Leadership entails developing the skills required to encourage the correct expectations and insights needed to facilitate effective support. Improving the less talked about aspects of managing projects, requires embracing the core importance of communication and applying upwards, as well as downwards and sideways.

George Bernard Shaw noted that the single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place. To embrace successful delivery, practitioners need to ensure that the artful skills of effective communication are developed, fine tuned and improved continuously, thereby enabling all the other tools and techniques to work.

Editor's note: Darren Dalcher is the editor of the series of books on Advances in Project Management published by Gower in the UK. Information about the Gower series can be found at <http://www.gowerpublishing.com/advancesinprojectmanagement>. The above article is an introduction to the invited paper this month in the PMWJ by Gower author Dr Lynda Bourne on the subject of "Communicating Upwards with Effect." You can find previously published articles by Prof Dalcher and Gower authors at www.pmworldlibrary.net.

About the Author



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Darren Dalcher, Ph.D. HonFAPM, FRSA, FBCS, CITP, FCMI is Professor of Project Management at the University of Hertfordshire, and founder and Director of the National Centre for Project Management (NCPM) in the UK. He has been named by the Association for Project Management (APM) as one of the top 10 “movers and shapers” in project management in 2008 and was voted Project Magazine’s “Academic of the Year” for his contribution in “integrating and weaving academic work with practice”. Following industrial and consultancy experience in managing IT projects, Professor Dalcher gained his PhD in Software Engineering from King's College, University of London. Professor Dalcher has written over 150 papers and book chapters on project management and software engineering. He is Editor-in-Chief of *Software Process Improvement and Practice*, an international journal focusing on capability, maturity, growth and improvement. He is the editor of the book series, *Advances in Project Management*, published by Gower Publishing of a new companion series *Fundamentals of Project Management*. Heavily involved in a variety of research projects and subjects, Professor Dalcher has built a reputation as leader and innovator in the areas of practice-based education and reflection in project management. He works with many major industrial and commercial organisations and government bodies in the UK and beyond. He is an Honorary Fellow of the APM, a Chartered Fellow of the British Computer Society, a Fellow of the Chartered Management Institute, and the Royal Society of Arts, and a Member of the Project Management Institute (PMI), the Academy of Management, the Institute for Electrical and Electronics Engineers, and the Association for Computing Machinery. He is a Chartered IT Practitioner. He is a Member of the PMI Advisory Board responsible for the prestigious David I. Cleland project management award and of the APM Professional Development Board. Prof Dalcher is an academic editorial advisor for the *PM World Journal*. He can be contacted at d.dalcher2@herts.ac.uk.